Glue Clean Up

Excerpts from The Message Boards

John Lucas: Norm Abram always wiped excess glue off with a damp rag. Today I was watching the American Workshop and Scott Phillips scraped the excess glue off and said, “I never use water to remove the glue.” That had to be in reference to Norm’s method. Well I’ve done both over the years including waiting for the glue to start skimming over before scraping it off. Is there a preferred method for this? Does one have an advantage or disadvantage?

JohnD: I use all three of the methods you mentioned, plus taking care not to let any squeeze out if I have the time in the assembly. All of the methods work and I generally use the easiest depending on the location of the glue and how hard it is to access.

About Norm and his gluing, I like his work methods for the most part, but I never found it necessary to brush on the glue, simply sliding the parts back and forth one time will do all of the spreading needed.

John in NM: I mostly pre-finish parts then glue together. Squeeze out pops right off once dry. I’m less picky with joints that will be planed or sanded flush after glue up, or when I’m using hide glue.

JL: Typically for yellow glue or hide glue, I use a toothbrush and warm water followed by an immediate wipe with a damp rag. I’ve got to sand or scrape to get the alignment marks off, so a little water doesn’t hurt.

Charlie Belden: When doing Windsor chairs Michael Fortune found dealing with glue squeeze out to be more work than making the parts for the chairs. He found stuff called Waxalit and solved his problem. It comes in a small can and has the consistency of Renaissance wax. Apply it with a Q-tip where squeeze out is expected, let it dry and do the glue up. Any squeeze out can’t stick to the Waxalit treated surface and pops right off. Some alcohol on a Q-tip wipes the Waxalit off, leaving a surface that will take your finish without discoloring or not sticking. Waxalit is available from Lee Valley.

Barry Irby: I have taped off joints with blue tape. The timing on that is important. If you pull it off too soon, the glue gets on the wood anyway. If you wait too long it glues the edge of the tape to the wood and it’s about as hard to get off as if there were no tape.

I have used water to clean up. You have to be really thorough or you will scrub the glue into the wood, and that screws up the finish. If you use a card scraper on an inside corner you can tear up the surface easily because one side of the joint will often be cross grain to the other.

Clint Searl: A wet paper towel is all that it takes. Squeeze out means too much glue, anyway. Norm would probably say I starve my joints, but I've never had one fail.

Bill Tindall: I stain most everything I make and always feared that washing glue off would just drive it deep into the wood and then it would mess up staining. Is this fear unfounded? Additionally this extra water will slow the joint cure and swell the joint area which can be a problem.

For edge gluing, where there is always squeeze out, I let it dry before dealing with it. If it is partially dry I will scrape it off with a putty knife. Otherwise I just run the glued panels through the planer and the glue goes away.

For mortise & tenon and the like, I try to avoid any squeeze out. If I do get a tiny bead I wait for it to dry and cut it off with a chisel.

Jesse Cloud: I think there is reason to be cautious about that wet rag. You wind up spreading a diluted coat of glue (a glue size?) all around the area, which will not take stain the same way raw wood will. For applications such as edge gluing, where you will probably be sanding or scraping anyhow, it doesn't matter much.

Curiously, I once knew a woodworker trained in England. She applied a thin glue size to the entire workpiece to ensure an even stain penetration. Different ways to skin a cat...